

Existentialism – A Definition

Existentialism in the broader sense is a 20th century philosophy that is centered upon the analysis of existence and of the way humans find themselves existing in the world. The notion is that humans exist first and then each individual spends a lifetime changing their essence or nature.

In simpler terms, existentialism is a philosophy concerned with finding self and the meaning of life through free will, choice, and personal responsibility. The belief is that people are searching to find out who and what they are throughout life as they make choices based on their experiences, beliefs, and outlook. And personal choices become unique without the necessity of an objective form of truth. An existentialist believes that a person should be forced to choose and be responsible without the help of laws, ethnic rules, or traditions.

Existentialism – What It Is and Isn't

Existentialism takes into consideration the underlying concepts:

- Human free will
- Human nature is chosen through life choices
- A person is best when struggling against their individual nature, fighting for life
- Decisions are not without stress and consequences
- There are things that are not rational
- Personal responsibility and discipline is crucial
- Society is unnatural and its traditional religious and secular rules are arbitrary
- Worldly desire is futile

Existentialism is broadly defined in a variety of concepts and there can be no one answer as to what it is, yet it *does not* support any of the following:

- wealth, pleasure, or honor make the good life
- social values and structure control the individual
- accept what is and that is enough in life
- science can and will make everything better
- people are basically good but ruined by society or external forces
- "I want my way, now!" or "It is not my fault!" mentality

There is a wide variety of philosophical, religious, and political ideologies that make up existentialism so there is no universal agreement in an arbitrary set of ideals and beliefs. Politics vary, but each seeks the most individual freedom for people within a society.

Existentialism – Impact on Society

Existentialistic ideas came out of a time in society when there was a deep sense of despair following the Great Depression and World War II. There was a spirit of optimism in society that was destroyed by World War I and its mid-century calamities. This despair has been articulated by existentialist philosophers well into the 1970s and

continues on to this day as a popular way of thinking and reasoning (with the freedom to choose one's preferred moral belief system and lifestyle).

An existentialist could either be a religious moralist, agnostic relativist, or an amoral atheist. Kierkegaard, a religious philosopher, Nietzsche, an anti-Christian, Sartre, an atheist, and Camus an atheist, are credited for their works and writings about existentialism. Sartre is noted for bringing the most international attention to existentialism in the 20th century.

Each basically agrees that human life is in no way complete and fully satisfying because of suffering and losses that occur when considering the lack of perfection, power, and control one has over their life. Even though they do agree that life is not optimally satisfying, it nonetheless has meaning. Existentialism is the search and journey for true self and true personal meaning in life.

Most importantly, it is the arbitrary act that existentialism finds most objectionable-that is, when someone or society tries to impose or demand that their beliefs, values, or rules be faithfully accepted and obeyed. Existentialists believe this destroys individualism and makes a person become whatever the people in power desire thus they are dehumanized and reduced to being an object. Existentialism then stresses that a person's judgment is the determining factor for what is to be believed rather than by arbitrary religious or secular world values.